

Plymouth Road. The brigades of Hoke and Ransom continued on the main road toward Plymouth. Finding that the bridge over Welch's Creek had been torn down, Hoke ordered his men to cross on a mill dam. Anxious to make the attack, the men pressed forward rapidly, proceeding to the Washington Road by a roundabout way. The column then continued on the Washington Road to its junction with the Jamesville Road two miles southwest of the town. A company of Dearing's cavalry charged the Union picket, killing two and capturing nine. Two men escaped to give the alarm. Events now happened in rapid succession. The element of surprise being lost, Hoke quickly formed his men into two lines of battle. His brigade was placed on both sides of the road four hundred yards in advance of Ransom's men. Ransom's brigade was placed entirely to the right of the road. Soon the stirring sound of Union drums beating the "Long Roll" filled the air. The garrison of Plymouth was being mustered to meet this sudden threat from the south. The artillery in Fort Williams and along the Union line began to throw shells at Hoke's men, "but owing to the distance no harm is done." The Confederate batteries did not reply. (93)

While Hoke was beginning his battle south of Plymouth, Dearing began an accurate cannonade against strongly-defended Fort Gray from a distance of fifteen hundred yards. The fort's three guns and two supporting gunboats in the river quickly answered Dearing's fire. Soon the Confederate artillery fire began to take effect. Fort Gray's garrison flagstaff was cut down, one of the Union gunboats was sunk, the other was badly damaged and forced to withdraw "a respectful distance." Dearing's sharpshooters moved closer and closer to the fort, pouring in an accurate musketry fire, which annoyed the fort's cannoneers and caused their firing to be wild. Dearing kept the fort under siege, but delayed making an infantry assault due to a fear of heavy losses. (94)

Hoke, hearing the sound of Dearing's guns, ordered his skirmishers to advance. Soon the men were shuffling through the pine woods in front of the Union lines, pouring in a heavy fire, a fire which was continued until nightfall. During the night Hoke's line was moved forward and farther to the left. At 2:30 in the morning the Fifty-sixth North Carolina was ordered to prepare breastworks for Branch's guns in a position in advance of the main Confederate battle line and just behind the skirmishers. A detail of 250 men kept up the work throughout the night, until relieved by a Company of the Fifty-sixth at daylight. Throughout the day the work was continued by one company at a time, "under the enemy's fire." The Forty-third North Carolina, on skirmish duty during the night, was relieved by the Twenty-fifth North Carolina at dawn; and companies from other commands extended the skirmish line further to the right. (95)